



# 5-STAR DIVORCE

WHEN SOME DUTCH COUPLES CHECK INTO A RITZY HOTEL, LOVE IS THE LAST THING ON THEIR MINDS, AS M. J. HYLAND REPORTS.

**J**IM HALFENS LAUNCHED HIS “DIVORCE HOTEL” concept in the Netherlands on February 14, 2010. The businessman thought a Valentine’s Day launch was fitting for his brainchild – a “more positive” alternative to the standard divorce model. In Divorce Hotels, Dutch couples check in on Friday afternoon, sleep in separate rooms, and by Sunday night have agreed on support payments, property division and custody arrangements. The divorce is finalised, pursuant to Dutch law, with a mere formality, when the settlement documents are presented to a judge. (Prices start from €2499, roughly \$3150.)

And so I decide to spend two nights, solo, in the Carlton Ambassador in The Hague, one of five luxury boutique hotels in Holland that, on the weekend, double as Divorce Hotels. I sleep in a room done up in an English Tudor rose style, with a pink canopy around the bed, knowing that somewhere in the hotel, divorcing couples are sleeping, or trying to sleep, in their separate rooms. Only the staff in these hotels know who they are.

During the day, while ordinary hotel guests are downstairs sipping coffee and eating apple cake, there are couples upstairs in the penthouse suite, sitting around a table piled with sad paperwork. And there are lawyers, mediators, real-estate agents, notaries and, if necessary, psychologists and evaluators, all working away to take these couples to the end of their marriage.

For two days, I try to spot the busted couples. (I like the idea that I’m a good snooper; I’ve watched the box set of *Columbo* twice.) But the couples offer no clues. In the breakfast room, and in the basement bar, there are men and women cheerfully talking, or stooped in silence, reading newspapers, eating peanuts. They’re not fighting, but neither are they touching each other’s legs under the table.

One night, I see a young man, standing alone waiting for the elevator, his head lowered. He looks sad and bored, but so do most people when they’re in repose, waiting for an elevator. Maybe he’s simply worrying about the price of the reindeer pâté, and his soon-to-be ex-wife isn’t upstairs talking to a mediator about her husband’s infidelities.

JIM HALFENS ISN’T A LAWYER AND HE’S NEVER BEEN MARRIED. He’s 33, tall and handsome; fresh, keen and unscuffed. He’s also a born marketer.

He says the Divorce Hotel idea came to him when he worked as the commercial director of a law firm, where he witnessed the long-winded and expensive vagaries of divorce procedures. “People behave like children over a €3000 bed. And the mothers-in-law and friends and lawyers get too involved. I wanted a process that would take the noise out of the line.”

But it’s not a process that suits everyone. In

fact, most couples never even make it as far as the hotel lobby, having been rejected after a screening interview at head office, where a team of lawyers and mediators decide who’s ready for this expedited process.

“We ask them whether they were married under Dutch law, whether they own property and have children,” says Halfens. “If they’re suitable candidates we look after them through the whole weekend.”

This highly structured mini-break sounds like a boarding school with room service, in which couples, like children, relinquish control. But there could be some comfort to be gained from getting divorced in such an efficient way amid these trappings of comfort: for three days, the couples don’t have to cook, clean or worry about being alone. Halfens agrees. “Yes,” he says, “that’s my philosophy.”

“Once there was this older guy and he ordered champagne and he was standing up and already crying a bit ... and he did a cheers for his wife and thanked her for a very good marriage,” he recalls. “It was so powerful.”

Have there ever been reconciliations, couples who’ve changed their minds? “No. Never,” he says. “But people are sometimes nervous, shaking almost ... so we take them straight up to the suite [the mediation room].”

THE HOTEL’S STAFF KEEP A CAREFUL EYE ON these special guests, but they’re trained not to intrude, and there are strict rules. Staff mustn’t welcome guests by saying, “I hope you have a great weekend,” and when guests are checking out, they mustn’t say, “We hope to see you both again soon.”

Halfens chooses the hotels and recruits professional teams himself and says that for each divorce there’s a “custom-made program”. In the early months, no hotels were willing to participate. “Now they all want to be involved,” he says, adding that he has plans to open equivalent hotels in Germany, the US and elsewhere, and as soon as possible.

Halfens, admitting that he wants to become a leader in the big and busy divorce industry, even has two self-help divorce books planned. Earlier this year, there was a divorce expo in New York City. Masterminded by Francine Baras and Nicole Baras Feuer, the two-day expo featured panels of experts offering advice on the post-divorce dating game and sex after divorce. Also present were life coaches, lawyers, dietitians, anti-ageing companies and private investigators. In order to avoid being beaten to the punch by Baras and Baras Feuer, Halfens knows he must get his books published in the next six months.

He is clearly getting a kick out of his new-found fame. “In Israel,” he says, “I was prominently featured on several websites and in newspapers with big photos and the headline, ‘The New Divorce Guru!’ I couldn’t believe it.”

Halfens is also thrilled by the news that the Divorce Hotel concept may soon be made into a reality-TV show, with the multiple Emmy Award-winning firm Base Productions in the US. But the philosophy of Divorce Hotel is to create a less painful and less adversarial atmosphere for divorce, and it only accepts couples who are prepared to settle their fights amicably. Where’s the drama, the tension, in a show dedicated to friendly divorce?

Halfens frowns. “Yes, well, you will show on TV the couples also who are not suitable for the hotel ... sometimes ... the fighting couples.” **GW**

## NUMBER CRUNCH

BY JOHN S. CROUCHER\*

**50%**

Proportion of surveyed Australian women aged 18-59 who made a New Year’s resolution to diet in 2011; who stuck with their goal beyond the first week: 10%

**123.9 million**

Number of ounces of silver produced by Peru in 2009 (the world’s highest); by Australia (4th highest): 52.6 million ounces

**23%**

Proportion of surveyed Australians who said they had lied about taking items from a hotel minibar

**21,708**

Number of Australians who died of ischaemic heart disease in 2010 (the leading cause of death); stroke (2nd): 11,204; dementia and Alzheimer’s disease (3rd): 9003

**137**

Number of different traffic cones in the world’s largest collection (David Morgan, UK)



## DICTIONARY FOR THE MODERN WORLD

BY JACQUELINE MALEY

### FAT HANGOVER

Alcohol isn’t the only cause of morning-after misery. A fat hangerover is the dark, seedy feeling in your stomach that wakes you after you’ve had the cheese platter for dessert.

### FEMIVORE

A homemaker who blends feminism and environmentalism – and isn’t afraid to can her own tomatoes. A femivore wants to provide for her family from her own backyard, while reducing her carbon footprint.